

WITH
 SECRETARY OF DEFENSE JAMES R. SCHLESINGER
 AT THE PENTAGON
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DEPARTMENT OF STATE

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Secretary Schlesinger: Gentlemen, I am prepared to discuss with you the evacuation from Vietnam. PM 4 32

First, I should like to point out that in the divisiveness that has been associated with this war, that many of the men who fought there have considered it to be a thankless task. I should emphasize that their actions and their valor are appreciated by the people of this country and that we extend to them our thanks in this thankless task.

I dispatched a message to the Armed Forces the other day and I shall read a part of it.

"For many of you the tragedy of Southeast Asia is more than a distant and abstract event. You fought there, you have lost comrades there, you have suffered there. In this period of reflection you may feel that your efforts and sacrifices have gone for naught. That is not the case. When the passions have muted and the history is written, Americans will recall that their Armed Forces served them well. Under circumstances more difficult than ever before faced by our military Services, you accomplished the mission assigned to you by higher authority."

In this last exercise, once again I believe the Armed Forces have responded magnificently to the tasks that were given to them. They performed heroically under the most adverse conditions.

I will not go into any great detail. The Air Force operating from Thailand, the Navy off the coast, the Marines both on the ground and in the helicopters, as well as Air Force helicopters all performed excellently. They performed under difficult conditions. Among those that I should like to single out are the helicopter pilots. This was the most massive helicopter evacuation in history, far larger than had been anticipated. Some 638 helicopter sorties were flown once again under difficult conditions. The chopper pilots from the start of the mission to the close of the mission, worked for 20 hours. From the first alert it was 27 hours. After darkness fell in Saigon and a number of landing sites at the Embassy was reduced, they were forced to thread their way, with occasional fire, down to the Embassy and to set down on the restricted land sites under darkness and in poor weather. They extracted all that they were required to extract, and to them I think we owe a particular tribute.

Q: There've been reports, Mr. Secretary, that you were unhappy at the pace of the evacuation while it was underway and that you tried to get the Ambassador to speed it up in fairly strong language. Can you tell us what happened on that?

A: Well, the evacuation proceeded more slowly at the Embassy than we would have wished. It was largely due to the fall of night, the restriction in the landing zones; the difficulty of landing choppers, as well as the large number of people that had to be extricated from the Embassy. Naturally, under the circumstances we did not want the operation to continue without limit and we made attempts to expedite it.

MORE

Q: Can you tell us where the ships are, that task force, and are they leaving?

A: I believe all the ships have departed from the coast at this point.

Q: Are they more than 12 miles from the coast now?

A: Yes, well over twelve miles, I think. We'll have to check to be sure that they are all out but certainly with one or two exceptions they're out.

Q: Are they no longer making pickups?

A: If someone is able to reach any of the ships, there will be pickups.

Q: When you say with one or two exceptions they are all out, are those one or two exceptions within the 12 miles?

A: No, I was just simply stating the possibility that they might not be all out. I believe that they are all out at this time.

Q: Do you know what the time was when the order was given to depart the area?

A: We will check on that, Lloyd (Norman, Newsweek), and get that information to you.

Q: Mr. Secretary, has it been determined who gave that order to delay the pickup by an hour?

A: We are reviewing that; the order itself, of course, came from the command ship.

Q: Are all the ships sailing toward the Philippines now?

A: I do not know their destinations; I presume that most of them are going to the East with the refugees aboard.

Q: Mr. Secretary, when you spoke of a large number of people extracted from the Embassy being a factor in the protracted operation there, is that a larger number than you anticipated? Did it include many more Vietnamese than you anticipated and is there a breakdown on the number of people from the Embassy as distinguished from Tan Son Nhut at this time?

A: We extracted 4,475 Vietnamese from Tan Son Nhut and 1,120 from the Embassy according to the numbers that I have here. In addition, there were 395 U.S. from Tan Son Nhut, 978 from the Embassy; a total of 1,373. Third country nationals were estimated at 85 for a grand total of 7,053 plus the security force that amounted to 995. So that nearly 8,000 people were lifted out in this exercise.

Q: Total of 1,300 Americans?

A: 1,373.

Q: Mr. Secretary, have you made any initial survey about how much military equipment has now fallen into North Vietnamese hands? The second part of the question, will you be able to get those airplanes which were flown to Thailand?

A: The United States retains title to all aircraft that have been given under assistance programs. It retains ultimate title so I would not think that we would have difficulty in reasserting title to those aircraft. The

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the amount of equipment that has fallen to the Vietnamese, the evacuation in excess of \$5 billion worth of equipment. We have not gotten a breakdown but we shall make those figures available when we have them. I emphasize that much of this equipment will be unusable for the Vietnamese. Much of it has been deadlined previously. There will be availability of spare parts and the like.

Q: Mr. Secretary, is it true, as reported in the Washington Post, that a message did go to Ambassador Martin saying that the evacuation should be limited and the 19 helicopters would be the last flight?

A: As I indicated earlier, attempts were indeed made to expedite the evacuation from the Embassy.

Q: So you were unhappy about this?

A: I would not use that phrase. I think that we would naturally prefer as expeditious an evacuation as possible.

Q: Had you not anticipated that 1,000 or more Vietnamese were to be evacuated from the Embassy? Was that the main problem?

A: We did not have a fix on the precise number that would be evacuated previously. We had trusted that the evacuation would include -- of Vietnamese would come from Tan Son Nhut by fixed wing aircraft.

Q: Mr. Secretary, in the equipment left behind, was there anything that might be of value, say, to the Soviet Union, equipment they would not have information on?

A: No, sir. I believe that there are no high technology items that were left behind that would bring about any advance in their state of knowledge.

Q: You said that you had thought that the South Vietnamese would come from Tan Son Nhut in fixed wing aircraft. Does that mean that you had not contemplated that any significant numbers of South Vietnamese would be evacuated by helicopter?

A: Originally, we had expected to be able to evacuate all South Vietnamese from Tan Son Nhut by fixed wing with the exception of a relatively limited number of high risk people.

Q: So was Ambassador Martin acting beyond your expectations when he was loading South Vietnamese from the Embassy?

A: No, I would not say that. We had not anticipated that, but circumstances changed rather rapidly on the 28th. What we had expected at the start of the day was to continue the fixed wing evacuation from Tan Son Nhut. When it became evident that Tan Son Nhut was no longer available, the decision was made to proceed with the evacuation of those people who had been put together in mixed groups for evacuation from Tan Son Nhut and in addition, those who were at the Embassy. The reason for this was a pragmatic reason, that proceeding with the evacuation in that manner was not only advantageous on grounds of humanitarian assistance to the South Vietnamese who felt under threat, but in addition provided us, we thought, under the circumstances with the most effective measures for extracting the Americans.

Q: Now that the war in Indochina is over, do we plan to remove our aircraft from Thailand?

MORE

A: The ultimate disposition of our forces in Thailand will come from consultations with the Thais. As you know, I believe I indicated a year ago planned to further drawdown in Thailand and we will be making reductions in our forces in Thailand. The precise timing, the precise magnitude, remains to be determined.

Q: Mr. Secretary, during the past year, on several occasions you said that the American people would not tolerate a massive North Vietnamese invasion across the border in the event they did. Were you simply wrong or do you think something in the American attitude changed that you did not detect?

A: I believe that what I had stated earlier was that the North Vietnamese should not discount the exercise of American military power. I indicated that American public opinion was indeed volatile and that under the circumstances the reactions of the public might be starkly unfavorable from the standpoint of the North Vietnamese. Public opinion was not that volatile.

Q: Have the number of the Vietnamese refugees on the ships that are sailing from Vietnam increased from yesterday substantially?

A: I don't have precise information on that. I do not believe that there has been a very significant increase in the numbers that have been taken out.

Q: Mr. Secretary, if this operation was extended and expanded in scope -- the helicopter operation -- in order to take out South Vietnamese, what was the Constitutional authority to so use our armed forces?

A: The Constitutional authority to use our armed forces? The President has, as you know, the inherent obligation under the Constitution to protect Americans. There are three reasons: pragmatic, moral and legal. The pragmatic reason I have already indicated. At Tan Son Nhut where the bulk of the Vietnamese were located, they had been assembled in mixed groups for flights out on C-130s. It was the judgment of those on the scene to attempt to separate these groups at that stage might have provoked panic; might have extended into Saigon itself and that it might have delayed the withdrawal operation. The withdrawal from Tan Son Nhut, as you know, proceeded quite expeditiously. So that there was a pragmatic reason given those circumstances. In addition, as I believe the President's Press Secretary has indicated, there were strong moral reasons which the President has stressed, that we should fulfill our obligations to these people by providing them with the opportunity to be evacuated.

Finally, as you know, the President had requested specific authority in this regard from the Congress and both Houses had passed legislation providing then with that authority. That was an expression of Congressional intent. That legislation had not become final but it was indeed both legislative history and an expression of congressional intent.

Q: As a practical matter, this meant that the Option IV, the helicopter extraction as carried out, was substantially different from the one that had been planned. Is that correct?

A: I would say that there were more people lifted out than had been anticipated.

Q: How many were anticipated, sir? You must have had a plan on that.

MORE

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A: Well, once again we had anticipated that we would lift out by fixed wing most of the Vietnamese and most of the Americans that were located at Tan Son Nhut so that we would have been down to a much smaller group at the Embassy. As it turned out, Tan Son Nhut was closed and it became necessary in the judgment of all concerned to lift out all of the people who had been in the scheduled lift as well as the Vietnamese who had been assembled at the Embassy.

Q: These people who were in charge of this lift, Mr. Secretary, including yourself and your principal military advisors, think that it should have gotten underway sooner either on the day in question or in terms of several days?

A: I think that at the time there was no question that there was universal agreement about the procedures that were adopted at the time of the National Security Council meeting which was to attempt to evacuate all from Tan Son Nhut by fixed wing aircraft and that was regarded as the wisest course of action to be pursued. The change in plans that resulted from the closure of Tan Son Nhut were agreed to once again by all parties. As to the precise pacing of the evacuation over a period of some weeks, there were differences of opinion but I don't see any purpose in going into them now.

Q: Mr. Secretary, I was wondering, based on a report from Time Magazine this week, whether in fact there was a plan in August 1973 to bomb Khe Sanh, the North Vietnamese supply depot there and the surface-to-air missiles that had been put in there? Was there, indeed, such a plan and was it called off because of the Watergate consequences?

A: The article in Time that you refer to I think stated April of 1973, rather than August of 1973. In August 1973 the legislation that was passed with the continuing resolution authority precluded, I believe, any such contemplated action. In April 1973 I do not know whether or not there was a plan to proceed with out bombing. I know that there was great concern about the buildup of SAM capabilities by the North Vietnamese in total violation of the Agreement. They had begun to cheat, not in small ways, but by introducing into South Vietnam an entirely new class of military equipment and, of course, the agreement contemplated only one-for-one replacement. That was a matter of concern, whether it went as far as a decision to proceed, which was subsequently cancelled, for whatever reason, Watergate or others I do not know. But there was deep concern at that time about the gross violations that had come into being around Khe Sanh.

Q: Mr. Secretary, looking ahead a moment, Vietnam assuming it's a legal unification or not, has emerged as a major military power in Indochina or what is left of Indochina; could you give us your views as to what you see in terms of the threat that's posed to surrounding states in Indochina?

A: As you know, the Cambodians have declared their neutrality since there has been a takeover by the Communist insurgents. That neutrality may well be respected by the North Vietnamese. In Laos, there is a settlement, and once again one may hope that that settlement may be respected by the North Vietnamese. It will be an additional test of the North Vietnamese forbearance. One cannot tell with precision what the outcome will be, and that is a matter that will reflect the priorities of the Politburo in Hanoi; their assessment of their internal needs as opposed to their external objectives, whatever they may be. Elsewhere, along their frontiers, I would not expect them to indulge in hostile action.

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Q: Thailand?

A: That, of course, is not along their frontier. Once again that would reflect the balance in the Politburo in Hanoi between internal and external objectives.

Q: Mr. Secretary, you said most of the equipment is unusable that was left there.

A: No, sir, I hope I said some substantial portion of it, but I wouldn't --

Q: Why is it unusable, is it because of the lack of spare parts or is it simply because it was worn out?

A: Undoubtedly, there is some in the latter category, but much of that equipment had been laid up because of the absence of spare parts. Probably additional damage has been done; there has been additional wear and tear. So that some significant fraction of the dollar value of the original dollar cost of that equipment would represent essentially unusable items.

Q: Is there any rough estimate as to how much is usable?

A: I think we can supply such an estimate to you. A substantial fraction of the equipment had been laid up prior to the collapse at Ban Me Thout in the middle of March, and I would think that that equipment would be unusable.

Q: Mr. Secretary, do you think that the final denouement in Vietnam has caused any hardening of views within the Administration or hardening of suspicions about detente with the Soviet Union and China?

A: I'm not sure that I would use a phrase like "hardening." Undoubtedly, an event of this sort does cause a propensity to reassess policy. The President stated in his message to the Congress that detente is not a license to fish in troubled waters. I think that we probably can conclude that detente has been far more successful in terms of the direct relationships between the central powers than it has been in providing regional stability elsewhere in the world either Southeast Asia or the Middle East.

Q: Is it possible that we will be sending any further ships back near the coast of South Vietnam to pick up additional refugees?

A: I don't want to rule that out entirely, but there is no such plan at this time.

Q: I'm not clear, Mr. Secretary. Are all the ships withdrawing or are some still outside the 12 mile zone?

A: I would have to give you a precise update at the present time. Most of the ships are withdrawing; there may be some that are staying well outside the 12 mile limit. That would be matter of hours or perhaps days.

Q: In effect, you're obeying the North Vietnamese orders to cease forceable removal?

A: I think that those demands characteristically follow an action, rather than proceed them.

Q: Now that we're out of South Vietnam, what would you list as the areas in which we have an important national security interest?

MORE

A: Well, I think that the forward defense areas must continue to be in Europe and Korea, and indirectly Japan. In addition, of course, we have commitments which I would not expect to be challenged, to the Philippines. We have other major interests in the stability of the Middle East. We have our treaty obligation with Australia and New Zealand, which continues, of course, in force. I'm just trying to tick off the major items. I do not expect to say any challenge in that part of the world, however.

Q: Not even from the Philippines, Mr. Secretary?

A: I was referring to the Australia, New Zealand. I would not expect a military challenge to the Philippines, there would be no sign of that.

Q: What about Korea?

A: Korea as I indicated is a forward defense area. We are bound to them by the mutual defense treaty and U.S. forces are deployed there. I would not anticipate that anyone would challenge that U.S. presence or commitment.

Q: Was there any understanding, tacit or otherwise, with the Communist forces before the evacuation? It appears that they didn't try awfully hard to try to stop it with dire.

A: I'm not sure whether one should characterize that as a tacit understanding. Undoubtedly, they did not bring to bear the full weight of their military power. Undoubtedly that reflected a mixture of self restraint, diplomacy and the prudence in handling military units that has characterized North Vietnamese operations for many years.

Q: What justification remains for keeping U.S. forces in Thailand since you said in your Posture Statement that they were there for only a hedge against a North Vietnamese major offensive against South Vietnam? Since that has already passed, why would you keep any forces in Thailand?

A: I think that is a question that we will have to discuss at some length, obtaining Thai perceptions on that problem. A prior reason for their retention in that magnitude were as you stated, but the U.S. has long contemplated, even after the closure one way or another of the Southeast Asian war, the possibility of a residual force remaining in Thailand. We continue to be members of the SEATO organization with the Thais.

Q: Do you consider that an obligation to defend Thailand in case she is attacked externally?

A: I would have to consult with my lawyers. I think that there is an obligation of a moral nature under those circumstances.

Q: Could you address the status of Formosa?

A: I think once again that Formosa is part of the island chain off the coast of Asia that is defensible. We have treaty obligations with Taiwan and as long as those treaties continue to guide the country and are the highest law of the land, Formosa too will be protected.

Q: For years the stationing of U.S. troops in Korea has been based upon the completion of a five-year modernization program which started more than five years ago.

A: It is as yet not completed.

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Q: What I'm asking is the basis of our policy that we will withdraw our troops when that is completed at the end of the five-year period or do we now have a much more open-ended commitment to keep the troops in Korea?

A: I'm not sure that once again that I would employ your phraseology of about a much more open-ended commitment. In the first place the tying of the U.S. presence to the completion of the plan was a decision that was taken by the prior Administration and it was announced at that time. We have a new President. We have a Presidential policy and whether or not there is any such tie between a hypothetical completion of that five-year plan and the reduction of American forces, is something that would have to be examined. It is clear, I think, that a consequence of the events in Southeast Asia has been to shake the confidence of many countries in American power and particularly in American steadfastness. Under these conditions, it is particularly inopportune to contemplate major changes in the U.S. posture abroad; that would apply to Korea. And, of course, when the President was in Korea, he indicated his intention to retain those forces there for the foreseeable future.

Q: We've been hearing and seeing that there's a lot of unhappiness with the people around the bases where the Vietnamese are coming in. Are you receiving any feedback from Fort Smith, Arkansas; Fort Walton Beach, and so on from people who are unhappy about these refugee camps?

A: I think that you will have mixed reactions under such circumstances, particularly in the locality. I think that most of those in the locality will recognize that the necessity for the United States taking action and that I could expect that any regrets or strong feelings that are expressed will be temporary. We trust that those people who have been evacuated from Vietnam will rapidly be fitted into a place in the American society. For those that come here to the continental United States, we are hopeful, continue to be hopeful, that other nations that have expressed interest in their own humanitarian obligations, will be prepared to provide a safe haven for the people who have been forced out of Vietnam.

Q: Mr. Secretary, do you think that the fall of South Vietnam was primarily due to lack of military aid and support from the United States or do you think that there were other important internal factors that were here that led to the decay and collapse of the South Vietnamese army?

A: I think that it was both and in history it will be hard to separate out the various considerations that were at work. Undoubtedly, the aid question made a very substantial contribution in the immediacy of the collapse, and indirectly, it made a contribution in that for a period of a year the South Vietnamese have been forced to substitute, higher casualties as a result in the decline in firepower. Those higher casualties killed in action, running in excess of 30,000 a year resulted in a disproportionately large number of junior officers, senior non-coms being killed. Now undoubtedly the loss of those junior officers, senior non-coms affected the leadership problem. On the other hand, as your question does suggest, there has been a massive collapse here, that it might have occurred, might have occurred at some time irrespective of a greater generosity in the aid appropriations.

Q: In light of Vietnam and Cambodia, do you foresee any change of the American military posture in Asia rather than stated in your defense paper? Is there any change contemplated?

A: We are not planning to change at this time; at least that does not

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can that there is any planned change in the future, but we are not planning --
his time any changes in the purposes for which we deploy nuclear weapons.

Q: Some time ago, about a year ago, on this Korea position you talked about
ing them as a mobile force for use in the Pacific area. Has that concept
ow been rejected?

A: No, it has not been rejected and we have moved in the direction of creating
greater degree of mobility in that force.

Q: Mr. Secretary, you're not as positive as Ambassador Martin who is
as quoted as saying that if we had kept our commitment, Saigon would not
ave fallen; you're not quite sure of that?

A: I think it is very hard to disentangle these historical events. I think
that Ambassador Martin may be referring to more than the material assistance.
I think that Ambassador Martin may be referring to moral assistance of a greater
egree than we did provide; the feeling that the United States was indeed behind
them; and in addition was referring to the indications that had previously been
given, that U.S. military power would be reintroduced in the event of a breakdown
of the Paris Accords. Undoubtedly if the North Vietnamese had perceived that
that was a lively possibility, they would not have acted as they did.

During the month of January, they began to test and this was, of course,
as much as 18 months after the legislation that precluded additional U.S.
military activity in Southeast Asia without going back to Congress, that they
tested that resolve in the attack on Phuoc Long, the reaction of the United
States was to request the \$300 million that had previously been authorized,
but for which there was no appropriation. It was not as strong a reaction
as they might have feared and they were gradually emboldened to the point that
they began to thrust a division after division into South Vietnam. If the
North Vietnamese had perceived that the United States was once again prepared
to take military action, I think that the Paris Accords would have stood up.

Q: Was there ever any preparation on the part of the Administration or
the Congress to take such action?

A: I think that President Ford has spoken on that issue insofar as the
period for which he has been President. I think that it was the intention of
President Nixon in the summer of '73 and at the time of the Accords, to be
prepared to take military action.

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